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EPA: Chemical at center of West blast not 'extremely hazardous'

by BRETT SHIPP

WFAA

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WEST, Texas — The head of the [U.S. Chemical Safety Board](#) is calling the fertilizer plant explosion in West last month the worst catastrophe his agency has ever seen.

Fifteen people died and 200 others were injured last month when the West Fertilizer Company exploded. The Texas Department of Insurance estimates it caused at least \$100 million in damages.

It's all being blamed on a chemical that federal regulators don't consider a major hazard: Ammonium nitrate, a common, effective, generally safe fertilizer sold to farmers all over the country.

It's also a highly explosive chemical oxidizer that — according to chemist Neil Carman of the Lone Star Sierra Club — is capable of doing massive damage under the right conditions.

"It's stored energy, and when it's released, it could be released explosively and do tremendous damage," he said.

Carman said a raging fire involving stored ammonium nitrate is a catastrophe waiting to happen.

It has happened before.

In 1947, hundreds died and thousands were injured when two ships carrying ammonium nitrate caught fire and exploded in Texas City.

In Iowa in 1994, a fire at an ammonium nitrate plant claimed four lives and injured 18.

A blast at another ammonium nitrate plant in the French city of Toulouse in 2001 took 30 lives and injured 2,500.

In 2003, the European Parliament adopted rigorous new standards for the handling and awareness of ammonium nitrate.

In 2011, Canada added ammonium nitrate to its most highly regulated, dangerous chemicals list.

Here in the United States, while ammonium nitrate is widely recognized as a "potentially explosive chemical," it is not classified by the Environmental Protection Agency as an [extremely hazardous substance](#).

"We have a broken system of chemical regulation in the U.S. in terms of these extremely hazardous substances," Carman said.

The EPA has designated 356 chemical compounds as "extremely hazardous." On the list: amphetamine, nicotine, ozone and zinc.

Not on the list: Ammonium nitrate, the compound that killed 15 and ripped a town apart on April 17.

"I think the evidence is right here, on the ground and in the houses and schools and health care facilities that this substance is very, very hazardous and needs the utmost precautions in place," said Daniel Horowitz, managing director of the U.S. Chemical Safety Board, an independent governmental agency charged with investigating chemical accidents.

In 2002, the CSB asked the EPA to elevate all "reactive chemicals," such as ammonium nitrate, to Extremely Hazardous Substance status, or EHS.

That would mean anyone storing an EHS chemical must formulate a detailed disaster prevention and emergency response plan to the EPA.

The EPA never acted on that request.

When the a fire broke out at the West Fertilizer Company, one EHS chemical was stored on site, anhydrous ammonia, and firefighters reportedly tried to keep two tanks of it cool. Both those tanks survived the explosion intact.

But there is no indication firefighters knew about the 50 tons of ammonium nitrate stored inside a fertilizer warehouse that posed a bigger, more deadly threat. Horowitz said the lack of awareness and preparedness needs to change.

"I think that this incident demonstrates that ammonium nitrate is significantly more hazardous than has been recognized to this point," he said. "So people need to put additional precautions in place. That's absolutely vital."

The Chemical Safety Board says it could take several months to fully investigate the explosion at West, but that it expects to make preliminary recommendations to Congress soon.

EPA officials declined an on-camera interview, but released a statement saying it is premature to determine if and when the hazard designation of ammonium nitrate will be reviewed as the explosion remains under investigation.

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<http://www.wfaa.com/news/investigates/Investigates-Why-ammonium-nitrate-is-not-an-Extremely-Hazardous-Chemical-209389961.html#>

Sincerely,

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